

Message Text

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ACTION AF-04

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGUI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 293

INFO AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN

AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE

AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE

AMEMBASSY KINSHASA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGUI 1281

LIMDIS

TEHRAN FOR FAIRCHILD

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: PEPR, PINS, CT, US

SUBJ: AMBASSADOR'S RETROSPECTIVE PART 2: THE EMPIRE -- DECLINE
AND FALL?

1. FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS CENTRAL AFRICA HAS BEEN INDEPENDENT
OF FRANCE AND FOR TWO-THIRDS OF THAT TIME JEAN BEDEL OOKASSA
HAS HELD ABSOLUTE SWAY. THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IS THAT THIS
PERIOD HAS BEEN ONE OF STEADY ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DECLINE,
WHICH HAS ACCELERATED IN THE EIGHTEEN MONTHS SINCE THE EMPIRE
WAS PROCLAIMED. WE UNFORTUNATELY LACK THE CONTINUITY TO JUDGE
PANYTHING BUT RECENT HISTORY AND MUST RELY ON THE IMPRESSIONS
OF MISSIONARIES, BUSINESSMEN AND OTHERS WHOSE PERSPECTIVE SPANS
THE PERIOD SINCE INDEPENDENCE AS WELL AS A PORTION OF THE
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COLONIAL PERIOD.

2. HOWEVER, EVEN IN THE TWO AND A HALF YEARS OF MY STAY IN
BANGUI THERE HAVE BEEN SOME SIGNIFICANT CHANGES WHICH PROVIDE
CLUES TO THE TREND OF EVENTS. IN THIS PERIOD THERE HAVE BEEN
FEW POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS POLITICALLY, ECONOMICALLY OR SOCIALLY.
MY OVERALL IMPRESSION IS OF AN ECONOMY WHICH IS STAGNATING,

OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM WHOSE EVOLUTION IS LIKELY TO BE STUNTED,
AND OF A SOCIAL STRUCTURE WHICH ACCENTUATES INCOME DISPARITIES
AND IS INCREASINGLY PREY TO PERSONAL CORRUPTION.

3. THE DECLINE IN THE ECONOMY HAS BEEN GRADUAL AND UNEVEN.
IT IS MOST MARKED IN RURAL AREAS, WHERE ROADS HAVE DETERIORATED,
PRODUCTION OF ELECTRICITY HAS GONE DOWN, BASIC COMMODITIES SUCH
AS GASOLINE AND KEROSENE ARE LESS AND LESS AVAILABLE AND SOCIAL
SERVICES ARE HAMPERED BY THE LACK OF MEDICINES AND SUPPLIES.
CIVIL SERVANTS ARE PAID ZHPORADICALLY AND TAKE LESS AND LESS
INTEREST IN THEIR JOBS AND DEVOTE MORE AND MORE TIME TO THE ONE
AVAILABLE DISTRACTION -- DRINK. IT IS A SAD BUT EVIDENT FACT
THAT WHAT LITTLE WORKS OUTSIDE BANGUI WORKS BECAUSE OF EXPAT-
RIATES: EITHER MISSIONARIES OR FOREIGN AID TECHNICIANS. THE
ONLY MAJOR EXCEPTION IS THE NATIONAL COTTON COMPANY (UCCA)
WHICH IS BASICALLY UNDER CENTRAL AFRICAN CONTROL. OTHER RURAL
MONEYMAKERS: TOBACCO, WOOD, COFFEE AND DIAMONDS ARE FIRMLY
IN FOREIGN HANDS.

4. AS GIDE REMARKED WHEN TRAVELLING THROUGH THE AREA FIFTY YEARS
AGO, THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT LACKS ARE MEN AND MONEY. TRAINED
CENTRAL AFRICANS ARE SCARCE AND ARE RELUCTANT TO SERVE IN RURAL
AREAS. THE GOVERNMENT'S FINANCIAL RESOURCES ARE LIMITED AND
PRIORITY IS GIVEN TO BANGUI AND SUCH KEY GROUPS AS THE POLICE
AND MILITARY. THE OVERALL RESULT HAS BEEN A GRADUAL SLOWING DOWN
OF THE PACE OF LIFE "EN BROUSSE". BECAUSE CENTRAL AFRICA IS
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BASICALLY SELF-SUFFICIENT IN FOOD, THIS HAS MEANT LITTLE TO THE
AVERAGE VILLAGER. FOR RURAL TOWN DWELLERS, HOWEVER, THE STANDARD
OF LIVING HAS CERTAINLY DECLINED.

5. BANGUI STANDS IN MARKED CONTRAST. MODERN BUILDINGS CONTINUE
TO SPRING UP AND INVESTMENT IS TAKING PLACE. IN THE PERIOD
SINCE 1976, NEW DIAMOND CUTTING AND CIGAR FACTORIES HAVE OPENED;
THE BREWERY IS EMBARKING ON A DOUBLING OF CAPACITY, AND
FRENCH IMPORT HOUSES FIND BUSINESS BOOMING. UNFORTUNATELY,
MUCH OF THIS BUSINESS ACTIVITY IS NOT PRODUCTIVE OR CONDUCIVE
TO BASIC ECONOMIC GROWTH. IT CONCEALS THE DETERIORATION OF THE
NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE FACT THAT RURAL AREAS ARE BEING
IMPOVERISHED IN ORDER TO ENRICH THE EXPATRIATE BUSINESS COMMUNITY
AND THE NEW CLASS OF CENTRAL AFRICAN ENTERPRENEURS IN BANGUI.
THIS SITUATIOO IS UNLIKELY TO CHANGE AS LONG AS BOKASSA REMAINS
IN POWER.

6. POLITICALLY THE EMPIRE REMAINS FIRMLY IN THE HANDS OF ONE
MAN (SEE BANGUI 1280). THE PROMISE OF CONSTITUTIONAL RULE
REMAINS UNFULFILLED AND THE HOPES WHICH MANY HAD FOR A MORE
OPEN AND PARTICIPATORY SYSTEM ARE STILL ONLY GLIMMERS IN THE
FUTURE. FOR A BRIEF PERIOD AFTER THE PROCLAMATION OF THE EMPIRE

BOKASSA DID, INDEED, WITHDRAW SOMEWHAT FROM THE CENTER OF THE POLITICAL STAGE. THE PRIME MINISTER AND HIS MINISTRY OF TECHNO-CRATS TOOK ON A LARGER SHARE OF DECISION-MAKING. SINCE THEN, HOWEVER, ALL POWER HAS GRADUALLY REVERTED TO BERENGO. BECAUSE OF THE SLOWING DOWN OF THE ECONOMY, THE EMPEROR HAS LESS TO DO. THERE ARE FEWER COMMERCIAL DELEGATIONS, FOREIGN VISITORS AND CEREMONIAL EVENTS THAN TWO YEARS AGO. MOST OF THE EMPEROR'S ATTENTION IS GOING TO PROJECTS IN THE BERENGO AREA. HE IS DEVOTING LESS TIME TO MANAGING THE AFFAIRS OF STATE, ALTHOUGH HE CONTINUES TO TAKE UP ISSUES ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT AND HE STILL GIVES ALL THE ORDERS. IN GENERAL, HOWEVER, LESS IS GETTING DONE.

7. THE ONLY BRIGHT SPOT IS THE PROSPECT OF NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE
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ELECTIONS. WHILE ONE SHOULD BE UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT FULL PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IS ON THE HORIZON, NONETHELESS, THE VERY PROCESS OF ELECTIONS IS NEW. IT IS LIKELY TO PRODUCE NEW FACES FOR THE POLITICAL ARENA AND TO STIR UP POLITICAL INTEREST IN THE RURAL AREAS. IT IS AT LEAST A START DOWN THE LONG ROAD AWAY FROM ARBITRARY ONE-MAN RULE.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGUI 1281

LIMDIS

TEHRAN FOR FAIRCHILD

8. NOTHING WILL BE ALLOWED, OF COURSE, WHICH THREATENS BOKASSA'S POSITION, AND FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE HE SEEMS TO BE FIRMLY IN THE SADDLE. ALTHOUGH DISSATISFACTION IS ON THE RISE, AND THE IMPERIAL CHARADE IS INCREASINGLY MOCKED, BOKASSA'S TECHNIQUES OF MANIPULATION AND INTIMIDATION, PERFECTED OVER MANY YEARS, STILL WORK. I DO NOT SEE ANY IMMEDIATE CHALLENGE TO HIS RULE. THERE ARE INDIVIDUALS IN THE GOVERNMENT WHO MAY HAVE AMBITIONS TO REPLACE HIM, BUT HE HAS EFFECTIVELY PREVENTED ESTABLISHMENT OF ANY INTEREST GROUPS. SOME MINISTERS LIKE ALAZOULA OR MAGALE ARE UNSCRUPULOUS CAREERISTS WHOSE RULE WOULD BE SCARCELY LESS CORRUPT THAN BOKASSA'S. OTHERS SUCH AS YANGONGO MAY HAVE IDEOLOGICAL AMBITIONS AND MAY WISH TO IMPOSE SOME SORT OF SOCIALIST SOCIETY ON CENTRAL AFRICA. FOR THE MOMENT, HOWEVER, ALL ARE CLOSELY WATCHED BY BOKASSA AND WHEN NECESSARY
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DISCIPLINED. NONE EXCEPT MAGALE, A GENERAL OF THE GENDARMERIE, HAS ANY STANDING IN THE SECURITY FORCES, AND WITHOUT THAT IT IS HARD TO SEE HOW ANYTHING BUT AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT COULD SUCCEED.

9. OVERALL, I FORESEE A SLOW AND STEADY DECLINE IN THE FORTUNES OF THE EMPIRE. THE ECONOMY WILL NOT IMPROVE SIGNIFICANTLY, ALTHOUGH PRODUCTION OF CERTAIN COMMODITIES MAY GO UP. AID DONORS WILL REMAIN CAUTIOUS AND INVESTORS WILL BE WARY. IMPERIAL FANTASIES AND EXPENDITURES MAY WELL BECOME MORE EGREGIOUS AND DISCONTENT IS SURE TO RISE. BUT WHEN THE END WILL COME NONE CAN TELL. IT COULD BE TOMORROW, MORE LIKELY IT IS YEARS AWAY.
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